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ABSTRACT

Teachers who do not use specifically communicatively-oriented textbooks can still derive much useful communicative language work from them. A key to success is engaging the student in the reading and comprehension of the text. Class exercises that can be used as pre-reading or pre-listening activities include: (1) giving students key words or allowing them to hear very brief excerpts and asking them to guess the story, individually or in groups; (2) letting students read or listen to different parts of the story, or see pictures of the story, and together work out the entire story; (3) ordering story pictures incorrectly and having students reorder them; and (4) having some students view story pictures and describe them to the others. Reading the text, which should be done silently, can be accompanied by the students' asking comprehension questions of each other or of the teacher. Communicative activities to follow reading include: having students write down their interpretations of the story and comparing them; having students act out the story; and having students relate some aspect of the story to their lives in a variety of exercises. (MSE)

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USING YOUR TEXTBOOK COMMUNICATIVELY

Wendy Scott Ninian Millar

Introduction

In the majority of situations, the textbook is a decisive factor in our teaching. We often feel that we have to follow the book, not least because there are parallel classes, there are examinations and there are other subjects to attend to.

Pupils (and parents) also feel that the book is there to be used, and often object if the teacher misses out exercises or does not read through the whole text with them. Of course, many of the modern textbooks are based on communicative-type principles and have lots of examples of communication exercises alongside the more traditional type of exercise. For teachers using this type of textbook communicative teaching is not a problem, but those who do have rather more

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old-fashioned books can still get a tremendous amount of useful language work out of them, and language work of the type which may reasonably be called "communicative".

Communicative language teaching

Hand in hand with the idea of teaching communicative skills is the concept of student involvement. Though here we must beware of equating activity with involvement. If the pupils are not involved in this sense in what they are doing, then they might just as well be doing mechanical drills, so involvement and communication are interconnected and key concepts. Furthermore, if our teaching is to be communicative it also entails getting the pupils to use the individual learning strategies which they find most fruitful.
In the same way that activity does not necessarily equal involvement, teaching does not necessarily guarantee learning. What we are trying to get away from or suggest an alternative to, is the kind of strongly teacher-centred lesson where the teacher/pupils read a text, answer questions on it and then do exercises which are based on some language point in the text. We are not claiming that this kind of teaching is bad or that it should be done away with - we are simply trying a number of alternative ways of tackling texts and textsbooks which are based on structural principles.

Practical suggestions for teaching language communicatively

If we look first at the text itself: there are a number of techniques that we can employ before reading/listening to the text which can provide the pupils with a reason for reading the text other than in order to be able to answer the comprehension questions afterwards. Such techniques are not a guarantee of success, but your pupils are more likely to be involved in what they are doing if one varies the approach to the text and tries to give them something to do with

their language.

Here are some suggestions which have been tried out and which seem to work.

- If the story is short, give pupils the key words beforehand and ask them what they think the story might be. You can give them as many clues as you like, such as the title of the story, and ask them to work on their own for a very short time and then in groups of two or three. They don't have to tell you the whole story, but only the gist of it. They can then listen to the text or read it to see which group came closest to the actual story. Often of course, pupils's stories are better than that in the textbook, and then you can use them.

- Along similar lines, you can let them hear just snippets of the text and see if they can work out what it is about, who is involved. where it all takes place etc....

- You can split the text up and let different pupil(s) read or listen to different parts of the story, and then together they try to work out the complete text. There are different ways of organising this, either as a whole class or with the story being divided amongst a group, and you can do it with a whole story, or with a paragraph in the middle of a text.

- If you have the story in pictures for the pupils to retell what has happened, try using them before you read the text. Cut them up, hand them out to individual pupils in a group, ask them to describe their pictures to each other and then try to work out the story. Only after they think they have found the right order of the story are the pupils allowed to read/listen to it.

- And if you do have the story in pictures, which quite a few text-

books seem to have, you can put them on the overhead in a jumbled order and ask pupils to listen to the text and see if they can put the pictures in the correct order.

- If you only have one picture which illustrates the text then use that one on the overhead, but ask half the pupils to turn their backs to you so that they do not see it. The half of the class who can see the picture describe it to their partner, who has to try to draw a similar picture.
Obviously, the picture can be simplified and the task can be made easier. You can add items of vocabulary if necessary.
Having drawn the picture, the pupils are now *tuned in* to the text, and you can subsequently try to build up the story by asking questions about the picture - what they think it is about, who the people are etc.. It is remarkable how often pupils can actually "tell" the story before they have read it.

There are an endless number of activities like those mentioned here which can be used to involve the pupils in almost any text no matter how uninteresting the story may be or how unauthentic or stilted the language may be, and if you use this type of activity then it should not be necessary to ask the pupils comprehension questions afterwards - the activity in itself should ensure comprehension.

So far we have looked at what we have chosen to call the "pre-text" stage of the process. That is, what takes place before we allow the pupils to see the text. If we have managed to keep the pupils' interest up till now, we need to consider how to maintain it and make further use both of their interest and of the new language we have (hopefully) presented to them.

But first, having made all the preparations, we must, of course, read the text. Or must we? Do we need to? Probably yes, but how are we to do it? By getting the class to read it aloud in chorus, or by getting individuals to read parts aloud to the whole class or in groups?

No! This type of reading is in no sense communicative - and it is also a highly unnatural situation which only trains the pupils to read aloud (perhaps it does not even do that!) and few people, apart from teachers, politicians and newsreaders need that highly specialised skill.

The important thing, of course, is that the pupils do need to have practice in reading silently to themselves, and we suggest this is what we ask them to do. This need not take very long, and because we have already got the pupils to go through the story, we should not need to ask a lot of comprehension questions. However, it will obviously be in order for the teacher to invite the pupils to ask about anything in the text which they may be in doubt about. Similarly, the teacher may well choose to ask about one or two particular points in the text to focus the pupils' attention on them.

A third possibility - and one which encourages more pupil involvement is to get the pupils to ask the teacher or each other about points they do not understand. If they ask each other, this can encourage co-operation/communication between pupils and also help them to work out solutions together.

Having prepared for the text and read it, we now turn to the question of what communicative activities may follow.

- Find the Difference. The pupils write down their version of the story. The teacher then gets the class (as a whole or in groups or pairs) to compare their version of the story with the original one in the textbook.

- If the text is in the form of a dialoque, get the pupils to act it (provide them with props, hats etc. since it is much easier to 'be' someone if you dress up a bit). Do not let them read the dialoque from the book, and do not worry if they do not follow the original too exactly. Insistence on fidelity to the original will kill their interest.

- The teacher focuses the pupils' attention on some particular aspect of the (content of) the text and tries to relate it to the pupils' own lives. For example, a text on Guy Fawkes traditions in Britain, could be a lead in to a discussion of similar traditions in the pupils' own country.

- Linear extension (1) Pupils are asked to continue the story of the text (in pairs or groups) and then perhaps to get together in groups to tell their extended story to each other, or perhaps to compare their stories.

- Linear extension (2) The pupils write "the next chapter" of the story/text.

- Linear extension (3) The pupils in groups list the key words of their "next chapter" and then challenge another group to write the text using the key words.

- Lateral extension (1) The teacher puts the pupils in groups or pairs and gets one in each group/pair to play a role which does not exist in the text. For example, a nosey neighbour asking questions about an event described in the text.

- Lateral extension (2) The pupils write a postcard or letter from the 'nosey neighbour' (see previous suggestion) to a friend.

- The pupils write messages giving instructions or asking questions which in turn have to be answered in writing by another pupil. For example, if the text has been about a party, the pupils can write invitations to each other which would then have to be accepted or declined in writing.

- The teacher sets his pupils a cloze type exercise either taken directly from the text or based on it.

Conclusion

We have made only a limited number of suggestions here, and have deliberately chosen to exclude the more traditional type of closely controlled exercise which is to be found in most textbooks and which, of course, still has its uses for practising the mechanics of a foreign language. We have also tried to confine ourselves to types of activity which require a minimum of preparation by the teacher.

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